When Calgary Was Young and Lusty

CALGARY HERALD OCT. 30, 1943

By RENA MILLAR

On October 26, 1907, a train drew up at the C.P.R. platform in Calgary and deposited, among many other passengers, a slim little lady, together with four girls, aged from 9 to 15 years, and one very small boy of 7, who clung to his mother's hand crying, "Where is my father? Where is my father?"

This is the first of a series of articles on early days in Calgary. Subsequent articles will appear from time to time.

Father had preceded us to Canada by several months and, by dint of hard work, scraping and saving, had established himself, with two partners, in a small but remunerative bakery business on Eighth Avenue, then Stephen Avenue.

When mother received word to "pack and come along," she had sold the business in Scotland and disposed of most of the furniture. Saving, of course, the sewing machine, the family Bible, photograph albums and a various assortment of "necessities" dear to the heart of a woman, which were packed into large square boxes to follow later, she set sail for "the Colonies."

Of our trials and pleasures on the trip, little need be said. We were all sea-sick, all except the pet canary "Dick" which my sister insisted on bringing with her. Mother had her hands full for a few days until we regained our sea legs and got up on deck again. We had been advised to travel "Colonist" on the train so, after a full meal in Montreal, during which we were hopelessly muddled both by the language and the money, we took up our abode on the long train.

Travelling in 1907 was different from 1943. There was no such thing as air-conditioning so we got dirty and we were washed with hard ice-water until our faces were red and sore. There was cooking to do, too. At each stop the men would rush off the train, quickly gather up armfuls of wood from the platform and light the little stove in the "kitchen", a cubbyhole at the end of the carriage. Then the ladies would get busy preparing the meals.

There was light-hearted fun and frolic, too. Several boys going out to work on the farms would sing, night after night, the same song, which, as far as I can remember, started by giving her "Kisses one" followed by two, three and so on. How many kisses she finally got I do not know, for I was fast asleep long before they had reached a dozen.

★ ★ ★

But here we were at last, crowded around Mother on the platform at Calgary. Suddenly a tall man came over and kissed Mother. "Why, it is Father, and he has shaved off his mustache," cried my sister.

It was a blistering day, as many October days can be in Calgary. The "natives," standing on the platform, were lightly dressed and eyed our heavy clothes with just a hint of amusement in their glances. Father promptly arranged for our luggage and conveyed us down all the back lanes until we arrived at our new home.

Apparently houses were as scarce then as they are now, for the only one Father could get was a very small cottage on Fourth Avenue, and he had to buy $200 worth of furniture from the previous tenant to get even that.

We children were intrigued by the rusty iron pump which stood high in the back porch. We had to climb on wooden boxes to reach the handle. Placing the pail very carefully under its wide spout, we started to pump up and down, up and down. The only result was a queer hissing sort of sound which grew louder and louder until suddenly the water would gush out with a snort and a gurgle, shooting fully a foot beyond the pail. It was only after repeated soakings that we learned to place the pail at the right distance and then pump like mad until it was filled to the brim.

As the air went back into the pipe, it would utter a long, spooky sort of wail which my brother would imitate, jumping out at us from unexpected corners.

★ ★ ★

We were to have breakfast across the road at the home of a neighbor. "She has boarders," I heard Father say, and I was curious to know what kind of illness that was and if it was catching. I very soon discovered that this was the result of the growing pains which were afflicting Calgary at that time. Fifty per cent of the population had homes, the other 50 per cent were "boarders."

The next day, Father gave us each a five-cent piece; they were little ones in those days of 1907. "Imagine a whole thrippenny bit," we exclaimed. In Scotland we were given a half-penny each Saturday until we reached the age of 10 years, when we graduated to a penny and were told to "make it spin out."

I was the younger of the four and had not yet arrived at the penny stage, so I was overjoyed to receive the little silver coin. Mother did not explain, perhaps she did not as yet know, that this was the smallest coin in use, the humble penny coming into its own at a later date.

This was treasure indeed, and we went uptown to spend it. Never was financier more careful with his investments than we three, my little brother, my sister, and I. The two older girls were left at home to help Mother get the house in order. My sister decided to get some "sweets," an expression the store-keeper did not understand until they were pointed out to him in the window.

My brother decided he would like some apples which we saw in a Chinese store window; they were lovely rosy apples but we were rather afraid of the Chinese. He was a funny looking man, dressed in a black suit made from shiny material and fastened in front with "frogs" made from braid. The sleeves were wide and he kept putting his hands in them as if he were cold. He had flat shoes on his feet, shoes without either backs or heels and, as he turned to go into the store, they flapped "clickety clack."

We were simply fascinated by his long black pig-tail and were almost afraid to enter until we saw other children go in and come out quite unharmed. In exchange for his precious coin, my brother got a bag of apples so big, he staggered out of the door.

After much consideration, I decided to buy gum. Gum, in Scotland, was a pink, waxy affair, highly scented, which had to be bought "on the quiet," chewed in private, as not being quite proper, and discarded as soon as a parent's footstep was heard. I decided it must be permitted here, as there was so much of it in the stores, and besides, I had distinctly seen Father chewing some that morning when he met us at the train.

★ ★ ★

Armed with our treasures, we made our way down the dusty wooden sidewalks which, at that time, extended only a few blocks. They were made of cross-pieces of wood fastened to long timbers. It was fun to walk two and jump three and we soon arrived home where we were quickly bedded down for the night.

Our bed, let me say, was a "shake-down," which, I should explain, is a mattress carefully placed over papers on the floor, then covered as usual, with sheets and blankets. I do not remember the sheets, but I do know the blankets were warm as we snuggled down.

It was our first day in the West and we slept sound so that we might wake up early, for there were new lands to explore, a new school to attend, new friends to make. It was a land of promise, a new and a very pleasant way of life

When Calgary Was Young and Lusty

By RENA MILLAR

"I simply must find a larger store." It was our first week-end in Calgary, and Father was describing the growth of the bakery business on Stephen Avenue, now Eighth Avenue. He had just placed the sum of $200 on the table, in bills and silver.

"Is it all ours?" my brother exclaimed, his eyes popping as the bright coins glinted in the morning sun. Father laughed. "Come along, Mother, you are in this too," and he proceeded to give us our first lesson in Canadian money.

It was not long before the business was moved to the Pitman block on Stephen Avenue. There was no sidewalk, and the avenue was inches deep in soft earth, which in summer blew clouds of dust, and in spring was a sea of deep, black, clinging mud.

The new store was spacious. Cakes were not as plentiful as now but there were delicious scones or buns, plain or filled with currants. There were big, satisfying doughnuts, encrusted with sugar, which sold at 15 cents per dozen. There were loaves, rich and creamy, 16 ounces in weight, which were baked four together in a square pan and sold four for 25 cents.

This was the bread the Indians loved. They were camped south of the Mission bridge and came in to Calgary on horseback or driving long flat carts.

These Indians never begged. They were good paying customers, buying a dollar's worth of bread at a time, and placing the loaves carefully into a sack.

★ ★ ★

Once when a pretty little Indian mother came into the store, a little papoose peeping around her shoulder, my sister handed the child a cookie. "This is for you," she said, "and you too", this to another child clinging shyly to her mother's skirt. From then on, every child received a piece of fresh, broken cookie. As a result the trade increased considerably.

There was one young mother, not more than 15 or 16 years old, who came regularly, her little black-eyed baby on her back, its little brown arm outstretched for a cookie. As if pleased with the attention given her child, the girl would talk away in broken sentences.

One day she entered, eyes downcast. "Where is the baby today? Not sick, I hope?" enquired my sister brightly, and the little mother, her usually bright face twisted with grief, tried to explain that her baby had died. "Gone, gone," she repeated, bosom heaving, tears streaming down brown cheeks. We realized then that the Indians with their quiet, impassive features, were touched as deeply by grief and sorrow as we, who perhaps could gain a measure of relief by outward expression.

Business hours were from 8 a.m. until 8 p.m. each weekday, except Saturday, when they extended until midnight. The stores were well lighted, for Calgary, from its earliest days, had an abundant supply of electricity. On Saturday, even as now, the main avenue buzzed with activity.

There was the Arcade, too, always an attraction with its little picture machines, where the farm boys would congregate to catch up on the local news. Many a weary shop girl, walking home at the end of the day, was whistled along cheerily by these boys, who would change their tempo as she quickened her pace, until she reached the end of the resounding wooden sidewalk.

★ ★ ★

With the advent of automotive power, much of the color and glamour of public life has been eliminated. Take, for instance, the fire department. Never was a sport day, picnic, or exhibition arranged without the co-operation of this department. The colorful engines, the capable, perfectly groomed horses were, without doubt, the centre of attraction.

The old-time fire horses were wonderfully trained. They seemed to live for the moment when, with the first clang of the alarm, the door in front of each stall would open and out they would run to the appointed position by the shafts. In winter the outer doors would be closed, but in summer a chain was placed over the opening, lest the horses, in their eagerness to be away, should run out too soon.

Eagerness was hardly the word to describe their anxiety to dash out of the station, ears twitching, breath coming in excited gusts, body quivering with the glory of it all. This was their very life and, at the word of command, away they would go, bells clanging, metal flashing in the bright sunlight. By this time, all the volunteers who could get away, left their positions in the grocery or clothing stores, saddlers, bakers, butchers — in summer coming as they were, in winter struggling with coats and overshoes. These volunteers were paid 75 cents for each call and 25 cents per hour as long as their services were required at the fire.

★ ★ ★

There was always a great deal of excitement at a fire. Quite frequently an elevator in East Calgary would catch fire. It would burn for hours, great leaping flames which would turn the faces of the onlookers crimson, even while their backs nearly froze in the sub-zero weather. Every one who could, tried to help and, as some particularly spectacular bit of work was done, great cheers would rise from lusty throats.

The horses meantime, stood quietly by, still hitched to their wagons, ready to return to their comfortable stable. Never were babies tended with such care. They were dried off, rubbed, brushed and combed. Fed generously with oats three times a day, they were given a nightly feed of pungent, sweet-smelling hay.

In front of our store lay a big brown dog. His master gone, no one in particular looked after him, so many a choice morsel found its way to him from the bakery. As a result he seldom stirred from the spot unless there was a fire. Just as soon as the bell sounded he would streak to the fire hall, follow the engines to their destination, wait very patiently until they were ready to return, when he would run around them in circles, barking joyously all the way home.

Orange Juice

This is Leslie Canner of St. Pancras, a London district, who owes something of a debt to the U.S. Navy. The child was very ill, and orange juice, prescribed for her by physicians, could not be obtained. The U.S. Navy stepped in and sent her oranges by the bushel. She'll recover.

Calgary Herald, Nov. 6, 1943

When Calgary Was Young and Lusty

By RENA MILLAR

The churches played quite an important part in the early days, and we were soon invited to attend both service and Sunday School. Knox Church stood on Seventh Avenue at Centre Street, the First Baptist Church on the present site of the Southam Building, and Central United, in its present position, was known as the Methodist Church.

Almost an hour before the regular service, these churches were thrown open for song service, members of the congregation calling out the numbers of their favorite hymns. A full hour ahead was none too soon to obtain a seat as, by the time the regular service commenced, there would not even be standing room available.

The churches tried to make people content with their lot and give them comfort of mind, so, at the end of the sermon people were exhorted to make themselves known to their neighbors, to shake hands and state where they hailed from. In this way, many a family, newly arrived in Calgary, found someone from their own home. Whether that home was England, Scotland or Ireland, there was sure to be a friend who would ease the burden of home-sickness with which almost every woman suffered and help to remove that "alone" feeling which eats into the very heart.

Even as today members of a congregation take strange young service men and women home for a meal and friendly chat, so, in the early days, did western hospitality cherish the young immigrants who arrived in this city.

★ ★ ★

On Sunday afternoons, walking around the Crescent, we would count the number of men, perched on top of houses that were as yet but shells, busily hammering away, getting the shingles in place at an amazing rate of speed. With families coming out, the main object seemed to be to get the roof on.

It was not long before we had explored every nook and cranny of Calgary from St. George's Island in the east to the Spruce Cliffs in the west.

To reach the Cliffs we had to "walk the bones" as we went through Sunalta, which was then covered with hundreds of bleached bones. In spring, we would jump the logs by the Mission bridge. The river, unhampered by dams, was deep and swift; frozen over all winter long, it provided unlimited skating pleasure. With the spring thaw, soft, broken ice would pile up, gathering with it many logs which had not yet reached their destination.

This was the favorite sport of the young couples in Calgary, the boys going first to test the logs, then the young ladies, long skirts grasped firmly in one hand, the other resting in the reassuring grip of a boy. And if he held her hand a little longer, or a little tighter, than was absolutely necessary, why, it was springtime, and that was a man's way with a maid.

★ ★ ★

"May we have a party, mother?" A party was truly a gala event in 1908. Each family contrived to have at least one during the long winter season. We continued to tease mother until she consented, then we begged father to bake us a cake and ice it for the occasion. Icing was seldom used, as a general rule thin slices of citron,, a few raisins or sprinkled sugar made the decoration.

"Run out to the yard and get some ice," I was told. We had obtained an ice cream freezer, and my sisters were measuring into it milk, cream, sugar and beaten eggs. My brother and I broke icicles which hung from the eaves, so big and heavy they nearly reached the ground. These were chipped and mixed with salt, then packed around the long container after it was placed in its green wooden tub.

Then came the turning of the handle which was perched on top of the freezer. Around and around it would go until our arms ached. Eventually the last turn would be made, the contents tasted and pronounced perfect, the whole thing covered with ice and salt and placed on the cool back porch until needed.

Every available pot, pan or kettle was filled from the pump and placed on the hot range. The copper-bottomed wash boiler was requisitioned for washing up purposes; filled to the brim, it stood on the back of the stove.

As soon as supper was over, we cleared the sitting room of all but the heater, piano and chairs, which were stacked around the room. If chairs were scarce, a sturdy plank was commandeered for the occasion, placed carefully between two chairs and covered with an Indian blanket or piece of bright chintz. The rug was rolled back and the floor sprinkled with powdered wax.

Finally we were dressed in our best party frocks, my little brother in his best suit. We girls had huge aprons, coveralls, over our dresses, to be removed as soon as a footstep was heard at the front door.

★ ★ ★

Most of the girls who came to the party carried their slippers, as there was either deep snow or mud to wade through. Their street boots were high buttoned affairs with at least a dozen buttons at the sides. We always supplied an extra button-hook or two but some managed to button them up with the deft use of a hairpin.

As for the hats, I slipped upstairs on the sly and tried them on, standing in front of the long mirror. I scorned the sailors. The others had huge broad brims, amazazingly large crowns covered with great pink roses, or daisies with yellow centres set in leafy beds. I tried them all, posing like an actress with each one, until a burst of laughter and a stirring chord on the piano brought me hurriedly into the sitting room where a lively quadrille was in full swing.

The room was bright and warm, the big, ornate heater had little windows covered with mica and the fire within appeared to blink and twinkle with pleasure.

★ ★ ★

When the dance was over, they played musical chairs, and there were forfeits. Each loser gave a trinket which was only returned when she had paid a penalty which comprised everything from taking your best boy out to look at the moon to the old familiar "Kneel to the prettiest, bow to the wittiest, and kiss the one you love best."

It was a wonderful party, but all too soon "Auld Lang Syne" was sung with much fervor and handshaking, as the the guests departed into the night, breath smoking in the sharp, frosty air, we children were hustled off to bed so that the older girls could wash up, but there was much chatter and laughter as they conned over and over the happy incidents.

It was our very first party in Canada and a very successful one.

CALGARY HERALD, Nov. 20, 1943